French Fries, French Foxes and Crazy Frenchmen in Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction (1994) and Roger Avary's Killing Zoe (1994)

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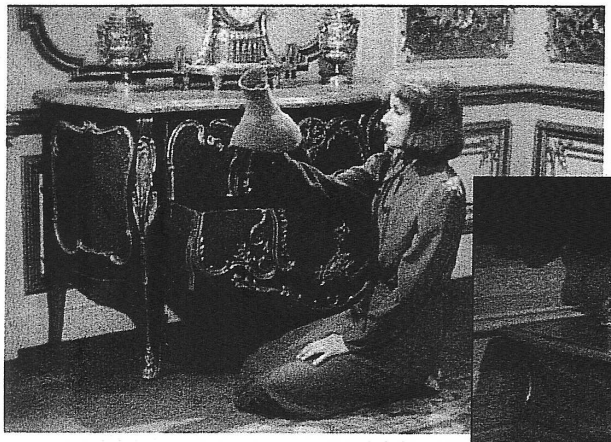

Mémoire(s) d'Hollywood :

du classicisme à l'hyperclassicisme

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French Fries, French Foxes and Crazy Frenchmen: Reading Hollywood "Frenchness" / French Readings in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Roger Avary's *Killing Zoe* (1994)

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For American audiences, there can be something "European" about independent American films, which are often released in the same theaters as foreign films. This may have something to do with the film-makers' proclaimed adhesion to the *Cahiers du cinéma* model of the director as *auteur*. If the directors of the 1970s, who had often studied American cinema through the prism of European criticism, imposed this model (Saada 1995, 5), the 1990s saw the "return of the *auteurs*" and independent cinema with renewed interested from Hollywood (*Ibid*, 8). It is with this in mind that I want to examine "Frenchness" in films which self-consciously play on Hollywood representations of France, by directors who have visited France and Europe and proclaim themselves to be *auteurs* in the vein of the Nouvelle Vague film-makers they admire (Surcouf 1998, 120)[1].

1 Avary talks about the "concept of the auteur" in the DVD Extra "Shooting Zoe" [23:55].

Very little has been written about the representation of France in American cinema. The essays in *France/Hollywood* offer mainly historical readings of exchanges between both countries, notably concerning the question of the " 'American threat' and the resistance of French cinema, French popular press and national institutions to a commercial, ideological and aesthetic imperialism" (Barnier 2002, 12-3, my translation); they deal only in passing with the representation of France in American films. Hilary Radner, however, does mention the way "[t]he cultural policies of the 1980s inaugurated by Jack Lang made explicit the need to exploit 'Frenchness' as part of France's resources in a global market, The Eiffel Tower, the Seine, the Champs-Élysées, etc." and concludes that "[t]ourism, the circulation of a set of images, of 'views' that can be bought and sold as objects because they can be recognized and reproduced, is only the most obvious symptom of Europe's self-commodification" (*Ibid*, 215-6). Brigitte Humbert's "Screening France" focuses on "American films about France and French people" (Humbert 2003, 81), as well as American remakes of French films, thus referring to the French contention that "the 'evil empire' is trying to eradicate French culture" (*Ibid*, 88). She suggests that shooting on location in France "falsely [makes *The Man in the Iron Mask*] look genuine" (*Ibid*, 85). She notes that "French women are usually displayed as seductive and loose" (*Ibid*, 82) and their accent is often perceived "as one of [their] most seductive traits" (*Ibid*, 89), while the "seduction" of French men is "often counterbalanced with other less attractive traits," e.g. "a questionable notion of hygiene, and a flagrant rudeness" (*Ibid*, 82). Humbert takes up Pierre Verdaguer's argument that, "in American eyes, the typical Frenchman is 'the aristocrat,' an image that doesn't sit too well [...] with America's democratic ideal. 'This Frenchman [...] is anti-American because he is anti-egalitarian.' " (*Ibid*, 83) She concludes that, for Hollywood, "French movies should be about aristocrats, love and sex, but not violence" (*Ibid*, 88).

A good example of intellectual exchange, Pierre Verdaguer's essay "Hollywood's Frenchness" takes up where Humbert left off. He argues that France is generally associated with "feminine weakness" (Verdaguer 2004, 445). The image of French men is ambiguous. "French foes are not numerous," but "almost invariably, they are portrayed as sophisticated villains, dangerous and intimidating representatives of a culture of grandeur. This adds a measure of ambivalence to their evil side, since sophistication is both perceived as elitist (and therefore anti-democratic and loathsome from an American perspective) and awe-inspiring" (*Ibid*, 443). When French male characters are "converted from bad to good," it is "achieved through beneficial American influence" (*Ibid*, 446). Conversely, the image of French women is generally positive, even when they are loose, e.g. *Killing Zoe* where "trustworthiness and sincerity in love may go

hand in hand with permissiveness" (*Ibid*, 446). For Verdaguer, French female women in Hollywood films are, in the end, "the worthy descendants of Joan of Arc" and "the true allies of America" (*Ibid*, 447), often rescuing their American lovers, e.g. *Killing Zoe* (*Ibid*, 447).

I have chosen *Pulp Fiction* and *Killing Zoe* for several reasons. First, both films depict instances of what Verdaguer calls "Frenchness," but they do so in different ways: *Pulp Fiction* contains several anecdotal references to French culture and one French character, while *Killing Zoe* takes place in France and has a predominantly French cast with only one American actor and one English actor. Secondly, the two directors supposedly worked together on each other's film, Avary as co-writer and Tarantino as executive producer, and the two films were released the same year. I am hoping, then, for some coherence in spite of the differences between these films. To my knowledge, the treatment of Frenchness in *Pulp Fiction* has not been examined in the many publications dealing with Tarantino's work. *Killing Zoe*, however, is often cited as an example by Verdaguer, but the film itself has received no critical attention.

The representation of Frenchness in these films will be my starting point to determine the readings possible for a spectator who is or is not familiar with French and French culture. "Frenchness" will be shown to be a Hollywood-produced norm the films play on as they do on generic norms. Particular attention will be played to how Frenchness contributes to structure the films' narratives, and to the ways French contributes to a form of polyphony which multiplies and complexifies readings. I will argue that *Killing Zoe* literally (and violently) excludes the spectator not familiar with French, denying access to much of the film's plot and subtext, whereas *Pulp Fiction* includes both, although both films ultimately construct an ideal spectator that, in the end, may be a mere narcissistic reflection of the *auteur* director capable of understanding and linking all levels of the film. As Antoine de Baecque notes, *auteur* "means just about the same thing for the film-makers who adhere to it: making films that resemble them" (de Baecque 2001, 6, my translation).

I. Pulp Fiction

Pulp Fiction is not an obvious candidate for a study of "Frenchness," yet there are several scenes where French is spoken or something "French" is mentioned, and at least one in each of the three stories:

- Pumpkin's calling for a "garçon" in the diner his girlfriend, Honey Bunny, and he are going to rob [2:45];

- Vincent's narrative of his experience in McDonald's at Paris on his way to work with Jules [7:50];
- Mia's mention of French Fox, the character in the pilot she played in, at Jack Rabbit Slim's with Vincent [37:40];
- Fabienne, Butch's girlfriend, who occasionally speaks French and speaks English with a French accent [72:45].

The only occurrences of the word "French" are Mia's "French Fox" and when Vincent and later Jules talk about "French fries." The word "France" is never used, but "Paris" is.

"Garçon *means boy.*"

The first instance of a French word occurs in the film's opening scene when Pumpkin, played by the English actor Tim Roth, raises his cup and shouts: "*Garçon*, coffee!" This line plays on several aspects of "Frenchness" as described by Humbert and Verdaguer: it is an attempt to appropriate French sophistication by linguistically referring to French culture, while the imperative and the absence of formal politeness evoke a French lack of manners. In context, however, Pumpkin's outburst mainly appears as an excuse to pause for dramatic effect before revealing to his partner, Honey Bunny, his intention to rob "this place" [2:45]. Only the Englishman's theatrics completely miss the mark as his command of French is immediately undermined by an American waitress who remarks without irony: "*Garçon* means boy." Indeed, no male waiters can be seen in the diner, just two waitresses and the manager, and Honey Bunny has gotten a good look at the waitress shot in close-up earlier on in the scene [1:05]. The first reading of the scene is, then, that Pumpkin has used the wrong word, getting genders mixed up. The American waitress's compromising Pumpkin's pretension to sophistication reinforces the impression that the English robber is a poser/amateur in a Hawaiian shirt who "doesn't wanna kill anybody" [2:20], as opposed to Jules and Vincent, the American hitmen who are introduced in the next scene and who commit cold-blooded murder in their three-piece suits.

But the waitress's definition of "*garçon*" also reveals her ignorance of another meaning of the word, "waiter," which is the only definition included in *The American Heritage Dictionary* cited in the film's incipit [0:20]. The *American Heritage* further indicates that "*garçon*" meant "servant" *before* meaning boy, the literal meaning having, in time, become the non-literal one. Indeed, the waitress's use of the word corresponds to the first definition in *Le Petit Robert*, Pumpkin's to the fourth. This brief exchange, then, inverts the opposition between the simple-minded

American and the sophisticated European[2] only to reinstate it, both diegetically and at the level of the response some spectators could have to the scene. Indeed, the spectator unfamiliar with French, or just with the fourth sense of "*garçon*," can only perceive the first level of the exchange, while the spectator aware of the other meaning can laugh along with Pumpkin at the American waitress's literal-mindedness.[3] The dictionary entry in the film's incipit clearly asserts that there are literal and non-literal readings of "pulp," the second metafictionally referring to the film's literary sources, while the first applied to the second evokes the "shapeless mass of matter" that is the film generically speaking. Moreover, even though the source is cited, the dictionary entry has been modified. The incipit, then, clearly constructs an "ideal spectator" capable of reading, and maybe linking, the different senses of a same word or text, while noting that they may have been modified, e.g. Jules's version of *Ezekiel 25:17* [19:30] and his various interpretations of the passage [140:50]. The question of "reading" "Frenchness" in *Pulp Fiction* thus implies taking into account the various levels of meaning as well as their accessibility to the spectator who may need to consult several dictionaries to grasp them.

"Royale with Cheese" & French Fries

The scene where Vincent tells Jules about "the little differences" between the U.S. and Europe plays on various aspects of "Frenchness" [7:35]. Their amusement seems to suggest that only the French could be so aristocratic as to call a "Quarter-Pounder with Cheese" a "Royale with cheese" [8:05], while the E added to "Royal" in Tarantino's script recalls the E needed in French to make an adjective agree with a feminine noun. These stereotypical film noir gangsters represent by metonymy Hollywood's propagating images of "Frenchness" as aristocratic and effeminate. Then again, the scene allows for different readings depending on the spectator's knowledge of American and European culture and of corresponding stereotypes of "Frenchness" and "Americanness." Indeed, Jules functions as a stand-in for the American spectator unfamiliar with Europe who would certainly be amused by these "little differences," while

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2 The stereotype of European sophistication will later be invalidated in the person of Winston Wolf, a classy, efficient character, who represents a parodic version of *Victor nettoyeur* in Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990), and whom Vincent "thought [would] be European" but who is, as Jules notes, "about as European as fuckin' English Bob" [128:05], a character in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992).

3 Of course, this is only true for the French spectator who watches the *English* version of the film *without* the subtitles. Indeed, the latter read: "*Garçon, c'est pour les mecs.*" In the French version, the waitress says: "*J'suis pas un garçon, j'suis une fille.*" Both translations miss the point that the waitress is defining the general meaning of the word.

Vincent could reflect some Americans' experience of Europe; this, in any case, is what Alberto Morsiani implies when he states that Tarantino may share Vincent's "disgust" (54). But someone familiar with McDonald's in France could notice that Vincent gets the name of the burger wrong: it is, in fact, "Royal Cheese." Not only is Vincent's accounting of French culture as erroneous as the waitress's definition was incomplete, but he also embodies the *French* stereotype of the American tourist in France who, instead of taking advantage of what is obviously the world's finest cuisine, ate at McDonald's and might have gone to Burger King had he had the chance [8:15]!

If Vincent's and the waitress's ignorance is not perceptible to all spectators, Jules's, however, is directly pinpointed, first by Vincent, then by Brett. Vincent's explaining that the French renamed "the Quarter-Pounder with Cheese" because "they've got the metric system, they wouldn't know what the fuck a Quarter-Pounder is" [8:00], constitutes the metric system into a sign of "Frenchness"– and of French ignorance of the pound system – when, for anybody not from the U.S., Liberia or Burma, it is, rather, the pound system that is a sign of Americanness and of American ignorance of the metric system. Jules's ignorance is further underlined in a subsequent scene when the latter asks Brett, his forthcoming victim, if he "know[s]" why the French changed the name of the "Quarter-Pounder with Cheese," and the latter shrugs as if the answer were obvious: "Because of the metric system?" [16:00] In so doing, Brett not only deconstructs the stereotype of the ignorant American the film has been constructing, but he underlines that Jules's initial reaction was, in fact, a sign of ignorance, undermining Jules's authority, as well as that of the spectator who shared Jules's initial ignorance. Moreover, Jules's asking Vincent "how do they call a Big Mac" indicates that he didn't really understand Vincent's explanation in the first place. Jules's saying "*Le* Big Mac" [8:10] in a mock-French accent for fun offers another example of playful polysemy, in the same vein as "pulp" and "*garçon*," constructing a metafictional reading made possible, this time, by *both* languages. Indeed, "mack" in English and "*maque*" in French mean pimp. Samuel L. Jackson's character is thus unwittingly referring to his own generic filiation with blaxploitation films such as Michael Campus's *The Mack* (1973).

I have been using French and European a bit indiscriminately at times because *Pulp Fiction* does not seem to differentiate between the two[4], which suggests that if Europeans do not necessarily "believe" in

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4 During the opening credits [5:25], the three European actors' names (Tim Roth, Amanda Plummer and Maria de Medeiros) appear consecutively. The film opens with a shot of

Europe, some Americans do! In the eyes of Vincent, an American who has spent some time in Holland and Paris, Europe is reduced to one entity. He skips indiscriminately from "Amsterdam" to "Paris," back to "Holland," and uses "there" to refer to Europe and "they" to refer to its inhabitants: "But you know what the funny thing about Europe is? [...] It's the little differences. I mean they got the same shit got over there that we got here, but it's just there it's a *little* different." [7:35] Vincent's *grand tour* of this "funny," distorted reflection of America leads him to construct the New World as, paradoxically, the country of origin. From the point of view of a European, when Vincent marvels at "the little differences," he is actually noticing the impact and the limits of American cultural imperialism. Significantly, the only instance where Vincent actually singles out a custom specific to one European country is when he says that the Dutch dip their French fries in mayonnaise [8:20]. Not only is this culinary custom not exclusive to one European country, nor to Europe for that matter – Americans have been known to do it as well! – but the term French fries is in itself problematic as it attributes a European origin[5] to a dish that is among the daily staple of Americans – Brett eats them at breakfast with his burger[6]. In other words, *French* fries have become a symbol of *American* culture[7] as well as a synecdoche of American cultural imperialism. They are a paradigmatic example of the way American culture ingests otherness and normalizes it, so that the *right* way to eat French fries, Vincent implies, is to eat them with ketchup [8:20], *à l'américaine*. This recalls Jean-Loup Bourget's thesis on the Hollywood practice of importing, appropriating and assimilating foreign traditions and Americanizing them (Bourget 1999, 213-4).

Jules's initial interest in Europe is based on its permissiveness, the scene's opening line, with Jules asking Vincent to "[t]ell [him] again about the hash bars" [6:55], indicating that they have had this conversation before; Vincent concludes that Jules would certainly "dig [Amsterdam] the most" [7:30]. The hitmen kill in cold-blooded murder, yet marvel at the lawfulness of hash-consumption in Holland, Vincent's descriptions of Europe evoking American notions of Old World corruption and decadence.

Tim Roth, who played an undercover American cop in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and who, in a sense, reveals his Englishness in that *topos* of Americanness, the diner [0:35]. Not only does Pumpkin speak the first French word of the film, but at the end of the film, his Englishness is mocked and marked by Jules who calls him "Ringo," the name of a famous Beatle [137:15].

5 The French often believe fries to be from Belgium when they are in fact Parisian.

6 Jules makes fun of his victims who are having burgers and fries, saying they are "the cornerstone of any nutritious breakfast" [14:50].

7 One may remember that French fries in the House of Representatives' cafeteria were renamed "freedom fries" in 2003 due to Jacques Chirac's position against the war in Irak.

This instance of what Europeans love to call American Puritan hypocrisy is, of course, parodically incarnated by Jules, a killer with a preacher's mask who quotes from the Bible "some cold-blooded shit to say to a motherfucker before [he] pop[s] a cap in his ass" [141:40].

French Fox, Fabienne

The film plays on another form of permissiveness, this one sexual, with its representation of French women. The image of the "loose" French woman is first conjured in the "Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife" story [20:00], where a man struggles not to commit adultery with his boss's wife. Mia says that, in *Fox Force Five*, the series she should have played in, "French Fox's specialty was sex" [37:40], thus illustrating the idea that the "loose" French woman, like the Asian martial arts expert, is a Hollywood stereotype. In any case, "French Fox" obviously heralds Butch's own French girlfriend, Fabienne, and I especially want to show how the treatment of "Frenchness" in the preceding scenes has constructed a grid with which to read the Butch and Fabienne scenes in terms of the following oppositions: feminine weakness vs. masculine strength, permissiveness vs. Puritanism, sophistication vs. ignorance. Indeed, the couple appears as another version of Pumpkin and Honey Bunny – Butch calls Fabienne "sugarpot" [62:50] – only this time the opposition American vs. European is within the couple itself, rather than reflecting an opposition between a Bonnie-and-Clyde-type couple and the world. If Fabienne's name marks her as "French," the actress who plays the part is an example of European hybridity: born in Portugal, educated at the French university and fluent enough in several languages to have played in American, French, Spanish, Brazilian and Portuguese films. Maria de Madeiros already interpreted a "loose" French woman, Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller's mistress, in Philip Kaufman's *Henry & June* (1990), also starring Uma Thurman.

Fabienne is a prime example of the voluptuous French woman who, like Zoe in Avary's film, is nevertheless capable of "trustworthiness and sincerity in love." She openly asks Butch to "give [her] oral pleasure," and Butch's pun on "pot" explicitly links her theory that "pot-bellies" for women are sexy [63:25] to illegal drugs and to her pet name, thereby condensing the permissiveness of Mia's "French Fox" and that of Vincent's and Jules's Dutch hash bars. Butch's pun links him, then, to Jules, suggesting that the boxer is also a figure of American Puritanism. Unlike Fabienne who articulates her desire, Butch does not name his penis when he asks her to "kiss [it]" [76:30], and when he steps out of the shower, he hides his penis from the camera's view with a towel – red like Hester Prynne's scarlet letter – when, diegetically speaking, there is no need to [77:50]. "A French name, silly as it may sound, clearly has erotic appeal in

the realm of stereotypes. French accents are also routinely a source of humor" (Verdaguer 2004, 442). Indeed, Fabienne is a sex object as well as an object of ridicule for the American character; Butch says her name out loud when he caresses her [76:10], but also when he acts like a "retard," calling her "My little Fa-bi-enne." [77:25] Fabienne first appears as a feminine voice with a French accent *before* appearing as a body and *before* speaking French in her second line where she says: "*Oui*" [62:50], a word no doubt familiar to most Americans. Like the French leads in *Killing Zoe*, Fabienne's English is good in spite of the accent and apart from the occasional awkward syntax[8]. Although this may be a mere question of making her English comprehensible for American audiences, it is clear that her Frenchness is marked mainly by her accent and the occasional French words ("*oui*," "*merde*," "*imbécile*") and that, in typical Hollywood fashion, her accent is meant to be both funny and "seductive"[9].

It is significant that the stereotype of Frenchness as "feminine weakness" appears in the flesh in "The Gold Watch," where the watch is notably a token of Butch's great-grandfather and grandfather participation in the two world wars [79:55]. In a sense, Butch is forced to go to the front *because* Fabienne has left his watch at his apartment. Perversely, the only line Fabienne speaks which can be understood only by a spectator familiar with French does not deconstruct this reading but actually confirms it. Indeed, if the context – they are about to make love – and de Madeiros's tone would certainly make the final line of the first scene – "*Butch, mon amour, l'aventure commence.*" [77:00] – sound sexy and/or romantic to a spectator not familiar with French but who might nevertheless know the word "love" in French, a spectator familiar not only with French but with French culture could perceive the reference to a Jacques Brel song about mornings and read it as an instance of dramatic irony, suggesting that Fabienne will be partly responsible for the following morning's adventure, in the same manner as her watching a war movie is responsible for waking up Butch. The French sentence, which enables a "sophisticated" reading that excludes most spectators who will simply see it in stereotypical terms of romantic French women, merely reinforces the American stereotype of "Frenchness" as "feminine weakness".

Moreover, the scene further crystallizes the American/French opposition along gender lines that associate the masculine with the

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8 Fabienne says: "a black cup of coffee" [81:05] and "So it all worked out in the finish," that Butch corrects when he says: "We're not at the finish yet, baby." [75:25]

9 Brigitte Humbert also says that, in Hollywood films, a French woman's "accent" can also be one of her "seductive characteristics" (Humbert 2003, 89).

paternal and the feminine with the childish. Fabienne is the child who asks questions – "We're in a lot of danger, aren't we?" [75:40] – about a situation Butch doesn't want her to know too much about. Butch acts like the father ready to indulge in his child's every whim: "And if after a while you didn't dig that, we could go some place else, maybe Tahiti, Mexico." [78:20] He is patient till he loses his temper and becomes violent, making her cry and then consoling her [106:10], his attitude making way to contempt when she says she's sorry for having forgotten his watch: "Don't be. You can have breakfast without me." [83:40] On his return, Butch even forbids Fabienne to speak – "Just come on, no talking now" – when she asks if "everything is well" [105:40]. When Butch tells Fabienne Zed's bike is a "chopper" not a motorcycle, the repetition of "baby" puts her in the position of the child [105:55], but her making the mistake a second time indicates how inapt a teacher Butch is. Unlike Fabienne who explained the difference between a "potbelly" and a "tummy" [63:40], Butch merely imposes the word onto her.

Butch also embodies the stereotype of the American who overestimates his command of foreign languages and geography. He tells Fabienne she doesn't know how to speak "Bora Boran" [78:20], visibly not knowing that Bora Bora is a part of French Polynesia, and his complimenting her on her "excellent pronunciation" when he teaches her how to ask[10]: "*¿Donde esta zapateria?*"[11] ("Where is the shoe store?") and "*¿Que hora es?*" ("What time is it?"), is all the more ironic as de Medeiros is fluent in Spanish [78:35]. Moreover, Butch's claiming that "Mexican's easy" when Fabienne admits she "do[es] not speak Spanish" [78:30] harks back to a previous scene which already revealed Butch's false pretensions. The taxi driver's telling Butch "[her] name's Spanish but [she's] Columbian" when he asks her if she's "Mexican" [69:50] underlines that she distinguishes between countries, on the one hand, and between nationality and language, on the other, whereas he does not. Butch is, in this respect, like Vincent who failed to make distinctions between Holland and Paris. Butch also fails to distinguish French from Spanish even though his girlfriend is French. The taxi driver's correcting him when he says "*Bon soir*" instead of "*Buonas noches*" reveals his inaptitude at speaking either Spanish and/or French[12] [62:10], much less teaching them. Of course, this reading is only possible for a spectator familiar with Spanish and/or French. For someone who isn't, "*Bon Soir*" could be *either*

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10 Note that Butch teaches Fabienne to ask questions, keeping her in the position of the child.

11 Note that the correct Spanish sentence would be: "*¿Dónde esta la zapatería?*"

12 Likewise, when Butch says he "didn't call [Fabienne] a mongoloid" but "a retard" [77:20], he shows he doesn't realize she was describing the way he was talking, not offering a synonym for the word he used to make fun of her.

Mexican *or* Spanish, but not French! Again, foreign languages in *Pulp Fiction* add subtle, sophisticated readings to the allegedly literal American text, as Butch claims concerning his own name, revealing his own ignorance at the sexual connotations it evokes: "I'm an American, honey. Our names don't mean shit." [70:05]

On a final note, I want to point out that Fabienne is not as childish and submissive as may seem. For one, she asks to be satisfied sexually first [76:40], and she puts Butch in the position of the "*garçon*" who must get up to deliver her room service, a role Butch willingly plays: "Anything to drink with that?" [80:55] Secondly, Fabienne's ignorance concerning Butch's activities – "Hard day at the office?" [62:55] – turns out to be feigned when she reveals she "never listen[s] to [his] fights." [75:15] Lastly, her response to Butch when he says "[he]'ll be back before [she] can say blueberry pie" shows that, unlike the waitress at the diner, Fabienne only *pretends* to take Butch's remark literally, answering: "Blueberry pie" in a desperate attempt to prevent him from putting himself in danger, so that it is ultimately Butch who ends up taking her literally: "I didn't mean that fast, but pretty fast, okay." [84:20] However, Fabienne does illustrate the power of American culture to subject and contaminate French culture. Again, this theme is conveyed through a food metaphor, when Fabienne is ecstatic at the idea of having a grand slam breakfast [80:45]. Her insisting on "blueberry pancakes" and "blueberry pie" symbolizes the weaker culture's submission to the stronger culture, because American blueberries are bigger than French "*myrtilles*," and pancakes are thicker than "*crêpes*" and are considered less sophisticated.

II. *Killing Zoe.* "This is the real Paris."

In appearance, the representation of "Frenchness" in *Killing Zoe* is completely different than *Pulp Fiction.* The film has French actors in the lead roles with the exception of Eric Stoltz and Gary Kemp who plays an Englishman named Oliver. The story is set in Paris and takes place on July 13th and 14th, the latter being "Bastille day" [30:45], the French Independence Day. Unlike *Pulp Fiction* where "Frenchness" is – with the exception of Fabienne – principally conveyed through dialogue, Avary's film seems to assert the authenticity of its representation of France, the director having drawn on his own experience of travelling in Europe to write the script[13]. Yet, the indoor scenes were all shot in the U.S.[14], and

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[13] See the DVD extra "Shooting Zoe," where Avary explains that he himself visited Paris by night in conditions similar to Zed's [3:45].

[14] *Ibid* [29:30, 48:00].

apart from the beginning and end credits shot from the point of view of a taxi cab driving to Roissy, and at the end the POV shot of the roundabout at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe, the spectator hardly gets a glimpse of Paris. Even when Éric drives Zed to his place [20:45] or takes Zed out for a night on the town and points out the sights, "the Eiffel tower" [30:40], the "Arc de Triomphe" [32:50], these Parisian landmarks remain off-screen as the camera focuses on the French cars (Citroëns) and the characters, notably Zed trying to see these sights which remain, for him, mere signifiers. Paris by night is reduced to a few shots of a *péniche* on the Seine and some streets [30:25, 30:50, 31:45].

Paris does, however, provide a frame for the narrative both as a location in the credits and as a word when Zoe claims she is going to show Zed "the real Paris" [92:15], a phrase that uncannily recalls an identical claim made by Éric in the jazz club:

> You like this place? [...] Good. This is the real Paris, here in the cellar. Up there on the streets, it's all just street trash. You have the Pompidou center, the Eiffel tower, all that tourist shit! [...] Oh God, the fuckin' Louvre. The people of Paris, they are shit. No one in France likes them. It's true. They're assholes. But then here, away from everyone up there, the tourists, the attractions, the fucking bus, cars . . . People change. Don't forget. They forget because they can't see what they are in Paris. Could be anywhere. [36:55]

Éric's description constitutes Paris as *not* French, then, establishes an opposition between the "real" Paris, an underworld associated with sex, drugs and violence, and the surface Paris accessible to tourists, associating the first to what Winnicott called a "true self" and the second to a "false self."[15] Éric is thereby condemning the image of Paris, based on famous landmarks, promoted by the French cultural policy Hilary Radner describes as a form of "self-commodification," and Éric's tour of the city, where these sights are mere signifiers, clearly frustrates the tourist's consumption[16] of Paris – Zed is too slow to see the landmarks pointed out to him. For Zoe, however, "the real Paris" she offers Zed to take a tour of corresponds to Éric's surface Paris, as the final shot of the Arc de Triomphe seems to suggest [92:50]. But that Éric and Zoé designate opposite signifieds when they oppose the "real" to the "false" Paris not only undermines the very dichotomy they construct, but also underlines

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15 Winnicott defines the "false self" as the self's social front.

16 Oliver's subsequent remark indicates that even Éric's "real Paris" is merely a sum of goods, "the music, the food, the wine" [37:30], the latter two being stereotypically associated with Frenchness.

its discursive quality. Ironically, at a metafictional level, the "real," afilmic[17] Paris that is shown in *Killing Zoe* is the surface Paris, while Éric's "real Paris," even if based on Avary's memories of Parisian night life, is a profilmic construct. Éric's concluding remark confirms, then, that the "authentic" representation of Paris that *Killing Zoe* proposes is meant to be a surface: the film could, in fact, take place "anywhere," maybe even in the U.S. where it was filmed.

For ultimately, space is indeterminate in the film. The opening credits, with cuts from one shot to another, each shot showing a different street the camera is sometimes turning right or left into, transform Paris into a maze, so that only the spectator familiar enough with Paris can realize the camera is going from downtown Paris to Roissy via the *périphérique* [0:20]; at the end of the film, the camera enters the maze of cars in the roundabout Place de l'Étoile.[18] Avary's claim that he based the first half of the film on his own experience of Paris suggests that readings of the film will depend on the spectator's knowledge of French language and culture. In any case, this position will be particularly *unheimlich*. The spectator who takes this representation of Paris at face value may be disconcerted at how *familiar* it is, while the spectator somewhat familiar with Paris could be disturbed by its unfamiliarity in spite of the veneer of authenticity.

Éric, Zoe and Zed

For underneath, "Frenchness" turns out to be a conglomeration of the same stereotypes discussed above: sophistication, weakness, femininity, seduction and permissiveness. Éric, the French villain who masterminds the robbery, clearly embodies Hollywood notions of French masculinity[19] as anti-democratic and thus flawed; he behaves like a tyrant with his men and becomes an almost indestructible super villain at the end, but his plan fails because he is a bad leader, a poor organizer and a most unprofessional thief who shoots up in the middle of a job [55:20]. He acts seductive, reassuring Claude [73:05] and introducing himself as "prince charming" to a grandmotherly bank employee [50:05]. He is somewhat effeminate, particularly when he brushes his hair back [25:00], and is probably a homosexual, although the shot where a man is seen

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17 Étienne Souriau distinguishes between "*afilmique*," what is already there, and "*profilmique*," what is placed in front of the camera.

18 From the start, Paris is a timeless place where Zed fails to find out what time it is.

19 That Éric's mother is American and his father French [34:00] metaphorically suggests that his filiation to negative French masculine traits has dominated positive American traits.

sodomizing another in the jazz club's restrooms is somewhat out of focus [44:40]. Of course, this suggested homosexuality refers at least as much to the "homosexual eroticism" Molly Haskell sees in buddy movies (Mulvey 1975) as to stereotypical representations of Frenchness; either way, the film is clearly playing on Hollywood norms. Éric conflates three stereotypical aspects of Frenchness, filth, sex and class, when he says that "[i]n Paris it's good to smell like you've been fucking. People will respect you." [20:35] He himself fits the stereotype of the vulgar and dirty Frenchman, his filthy language matching his greasy hair and his filthy apartment where a dead cat is lying in the middle of a room [22:55] and where Zed's drink is served in a soiled glass which had previously been used as an ashtray [24:15]. Éric and his gang of criminals are also heavy drug consumers and doing hard drugs in the Parisian jazz club is said to be "safer than in Amsterdam" [39:15] (perhaps a reference to Jules's and Vincent's conversation in *Pulp Fiction*), constituting "the real Paris" as the ultimate haven of permissiveness.

Apart from the bank employee Éric mockingly woos, the film's two female characters evoke the Hollywood type of the "loose" French woman. Zoe is a student who has become "an escort to pay [her] classes" [15:35], but, as Verdaguer argues, this does not keep her from being a positive character who bravely saves her American lover, a tendency Verdaguer notes in other recent Hollywood films where American men fall for French women. The second French woman is the masochistic nymphomaniac who comes on to Zed at the jazz club [39:55]. The sexyness of these women is directly associated with their native language as well as their accent. Zoe's rare misuses or mispronunciations of English are linked to a sexual content, such as when she stresses the second syllable on "or*ga*sm" [14:00] or when she says that Zed and her "fit together" and Zed mocks her by repeating: "We *feet* together?" [13:45] The relation between French and sex is very explicit in the jazz club scene with the extreme close-ups which fetishize the woman's mouth and the use of reverb to convey a "damp" quality to her voice.[20] The *mise en scène* alone is enough to deduce the woman is making a pass at Zed without understanding French and without reading the subtitles, but the latter do confirm that the blond and the brunette from the Paris underworld are doubles: her inviting Zed to "shit on her"[21] [41:05] indicates she is "a dog" who does it all for free while Zoe, the escort girl, had specified she refused to be "pee[d] on" [8:40].

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20 This scene recalls David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982) where the protagonist watches his masochistic girlfriend appear on a TV set and speak to him, her lips eventually filling up the whole screen which bulges out [34:45].

21 *"Tu pourras m'enculer. Tu pourras même me chier dessus si ça t'excite."*

The characters function in pairs which, like "the real Paris" binary, produce effects of symmetry that structure the film and contribute to its uncanny quality. The blond and the brunette are inverted doubles who have in common that Éric separates them from his friend Zed [19:05, 41:15]. Éric and Zoe also function as doubles, as their use of the phrase "the real Paris" suggests. They both have shoulder-length hair; their English, like Fabienne's, is most often grammatically correct and their "Frenchness" is mostly marked by their accent; they are both associated with permissiveness and they are both in dominant positions in relation to the American character who submits first to Zoe when she rides him during intercourse [11:00], then to Éric and his master plan, e.g. when the latter tells him to "open [his] mouth" and "swallow" some drugs [42:00], then to Zoe again when she saves him and takes him away in her car. But Éric and Zoe are also opposites: Éric is a homosexual man, Zoe a heterosexual woman; Éric is dark-haired (like the jazz club nymphomaniac), Zoe blond (like Zed); Éric is filthy, Zoe is taking a shower when he throws her out of Zed's room; Éric, Zed's "very good friend" [43:00], betrays him, Zoe, who hardly knows Zed, saves him.

Unlike *Pulp Fiction*, *Killing Zoe* does not conceal the opposition between American ignorance and French knowledge it sets up, an opposition which plays an obvious and essential part in the film's narrative structure. The American is the outsider in a team that is already formed when he arrives at Éric's apartment and that is composed of four French (Éric, Jean, Claude and François who has Vietnamese origins), one Québecois (Ricardo) and one Englishman (Oliver). Zed's being outside of the action is the very core of the film's narrative; he remains alone in the vault – as if he'd never left the underground jazz cub – while the Europeans above deal with the hostages. Zed's marginalization also has to do with his not knowing how to speak French, which he confesses in the opening scene [3:30], whereas everyone in Éric's team speaks English to the point that they even speak English when neither Zed nor Oliver are around. He will not realize the robbery has gone wrong till the very end when Oliver, the Englishman, tells him "the police have a rough idea what [they]'re up to" [81:25]. Because of the language barrier, Zed interacts more with Oliver – who, unlike Zed, speaks some French, notably to the hostages [59:15] – than with the Canadian whom he only talks with briefly in the car.[22] The narrative confirms, then, a remark made by Éric early on in the film; when Éric says Zed would have been "stupid to" refuse his invitation to work in Paris

22 Oliver metaphorically exemplifies Great Britain's ambiguous relationship with the U.S., on the one hand, and France and Europe, on the other, while Ricardo functions as a reminder of the U.S.'s lack of familiarity with Canada.

and Zed says he's "not that stupid," Éric replies: "Not yet." [21:20] Indeed, the American will take what he sees at face value, as Zed's response to Éric's asking him what he thinks of "the real Paris" shows: "Well if this is Paris, [...] then I like it." [37:45] He will yell "Suck my dick!" at the male prostitutes because Éric tells him to without knowing what it means [31:50], while the English subtitles make it clear for anyone who doesn't know French. All this heralds the fact that Zed will blindly carry out Eric's orders and will likewise be blind to Éric's desire for him.

American ignorance and arrogance become incarnate in a parodic scene where an American tourist dressed in a blue sweater, khaki shorts and a red baseball hat protests at being held hostage:

> Hey! This is insane. I mean I'm a US citizen. Come on, I'm just here changing some dollars. You must let me go, I'm American. You know from America? [...] U.S. of A.? Come on you understand English? If it wasn't for my country you'd all be speaking German. [60:00]

Not only does the American tourist feel compelled to give these crazy Frenchmen a history lesson, when the average American is reputed to have flimsy notions in history and geography, but by doing so, he is implying that France is a weak country that repeatedly had to be saved by the U.S. Furthermore, he does not seem to have realized that they have been speaking English all along, suggesting it is sufficient that they *sound* French (or even British!) for them to be clearly incapable of understanding (American) English. This character's righteous monologue proclaims American language, culture and values are universal, recalling Vincent's suggestion that the right way to eat French fries is the American way. On the one hand he embodies French notions of American ignorance and arrogance, and on the other, he promotes the American stereotype of French weakness. Éric's gunning the man down literally evokes French exceptionalism – Éric considers himself to be a "genius" [72:35] – fighting back against American imperialism, but it also points at France's ambivalent relation to the U.S. For in *Killing Zoe*, Frenchness bears the familiar mark of American culture, metonymically represented by music, cinema, TV series and cars: Éric is a Billie Holliday fan [25:05] and the jazz club plays Dixieland, music with "a heart and a culture all of its own" [35:10]; there is a French poster of Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980) in Éric's apartment [24:30]; in the director's cut of *Killing Zoe*, Oliver analyses *Stark Trek* as being about "bringing democracy to other planets" [28:15]; Ricardo, the Québecois, "like[s] the Cadillac, '53 to '75" [30:35]. As in *Pulp Fiction*, these "little differences" can make Europe appear "funny" and/or uncanny to an American tourist or spectator. Zed's own relation to French and France is uncanny as he is somewhat familiar (or pretends to

be[23]) with the language and the country, having "spent some time [in France] a long time ago when [he] was young" [4:10] and known Éric since he was twelve [33:55], but Éric's concluding that Zed "hardly know[s]" him [83:10] and "it means nothing to [him their] friendship" [87:10] suggest by metonymy that "Frenchness" nevertheless remains unfamiliar to Zed.

Reading French / French readings

I started my study of "Frenchness" in *Pulp Fiction* by showing how the use of French words and references to European culture enabled multiple readings depending on whether or not the spectator is familiar with foreign languages and cultures. The American version of *Killing Zoe* uses subtitles when the French characters speak amongst themselves, not when they talk with Zed, which explains why there aren't any till Éric kicks Zoe out of Zed's room. In other words, the film places the spectator unfamiliar with French in two distinct positions: he is either made to identify with Zed's marginalized position, or allowed, in Zed's absence, access to the French characters' conversations, e.g. when the French characters share a joke while Zed works on downstairs [56:05], as if the spectator were watching a foreign film.

However, even when there are subtitles, the meaning in French is often lost in translation, and what I now want to show is that understanding French is paramount not so much to merely follow the plot, as to read or interpret the film. For example, the many instances of the French word "*enculer*," a vulgar equivalent of sodomy, back up the reading of *Killing Zoe* as a buddy movie pervaded with homosexual desire. It is first used by Zoe who tells Éric and Zed to "go fuck themselves" [19:50] when Éric kicks her out of the room. The girl at the jazz club invites Zed to sodomize her [41:00] before Éric intervenes, which confirms that the anonymous girl in the jazz club is also Éric's double, as I previously suggested on the basis of the color of their hair and the Paris they inhabit. Éric's telling the police on the phone that he refuses to get "fucked"[24] [74:35] suggests that his homosexuality metaphorically reflects his desire for absolute dominion over others, including his team. Indeed, Éric's

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23 If, contrary to Butch in *Pulp Fiction*, Zed admits to not knowing how to speak French, he seems to pretend to be familiar with various aspects of European culture so as not to offend his addressee. For instance, when Éric asks him if he knows the magazine, *Le Figaro*, Zed answers in a dull tone: "Yeah. Wow." [21:45] But he'll answer in the exact same fashion later when Ricardo asks him if he likes French cars – "Huh . . . Yeah." [30:30] – and yet again when Oliver tells him Éric said Zed likes Viking films: "Yeah. I guess." [34:35]

24 "*Allo ? Dis-moi, sale con, est-ce que par hasard tu chercherais pas à m'enculer, hein ? Attends, j'vais t'montrer ce qui se passe quand on m'encule.*"

threat to "fuck [Zed's] bitch up the ass" in the director's cut [90:00] confirms that, for Éric, sodomy is not so much about homosexuality as about enacting his sadistic desire of omnipotence. The homosexual subtext conflates, then, the stereotype of French tyranny with the generic codes of the buddy movie[25], and is emphasized through a word that literally evokes the Hollywood stereotype of French vulgarity. What was only implicit becomes explicit, the generic subtext literally coming to the surface thanks to the French text.

The use of French also produces humor that is not always accessible to the spectator unfamiliar with French, particularly in the first half of the film where there are seldom any subtitles. In the opening scene, Zed is amused when Moïse[26] says he speaks "a little American," but it isn't clear whether Moïse was referring to his nationality or to a language he knows how to talk[27] [3:30]. In any case, this is one of the rare instances where Zed makes fun of a French character because of the latter's lack of command of English – the other is when he makes fun of Zoe's pronunciation of "fit". This means that Zed needs to *understand* the character to make fun of him. Zed's subsequent experience of communicating with a Frenchman is much less successful. If Moïse answered "day time" when Zed asked him the time [3:50], the bellhop answers "it's almost 7:50 PM"[28] in French [6:20]. Moreover, shortly before, after Zed momentarily failed to interpret the grimaces the bellboy made in order to get a tip, the bellhop literally helps himself to Zed's money, saying: "This will do"[29] in French [5:50], thus robbing the American thief. In the following scene, Zoe simplifies her English translation of what she just said in French[30], saying "[she doesn't] do weird stuff" rather than she does *some* weird stuff [8:10], while in a later scene, Claude tells his

25 The film's title, which equates eliminating the female character with eliminating "life" – in "Shooting Zoe" Avary explains that "Zoe" in Greek means "life" [3:30] – further suggests that the homosexual death impulse which drives the buddy movie is doomed to fail, Éric's statement resounding with nostalgia: "Never let a girl come between two men." [83:20]

26 The choice of a black taxi driver immediately deconstructs the stereotype of "Frenchness" as white *per se*, all the while claiming a certain Parisian verisimilitude. Moïse is somewhat aware of his not looking French as he insists on the prostitute's being "French" [4:50]. Moïse also represents the *blaxploitation* stereotype of the black man as a pimp.

27 Zed: "I don't speak French." Moïse: "Ah. English?" Zed: "American." Moïse: "Ah, that's good. I speak a little American."

28 "*Il est 19h50.* Presque *19h50.*"

29 "*Comme ça c'est bien.*"

30 "*J'fais pas de trucs bizarres, à part quelques trucs mais . . . sinon j'fais rien de tout ça.*"

monkey to "go to [its] room"[31] as if it were a child [24:40], which his merely gesturing at the monkey to leave cannot convey.

The film even thematizes its own use of French, which playfully produces humor and unveils the homosexual subtext of the buddy movie, but violently excludes, at least to some extent, certain spectators. For Éric's team, robbing a bank is just a game or a fantasy[32]. Violence is explicitly associated to play and "Frenchness" when Jean says "you want something spectacular"[33] [84:00] before getting shot down with a French flag in the background. François's saying that the police "don't give a fuck about [their] hostages"[34] [83:45] associates violence with onanism, an idea rendered non-verbally when Oliver is shown first playing air-guitar with his pump-gun, then stroking it like a fantasy penis [48:15]; this further recalls Éric's joke that playing trombone is like masturbating [36:45]. The film is hardly interested in the hostages, who remain mostly off-camera or in the background, and focuses, instead, on how much fun these "crazy fucking Frenchm[e]n" [35:50], as the Englishman calls Éric when he plays the trombone, are having. Furthermore, the film also establishes an opposition between Zed's serious professionalism and the Europeans' lack of it, notably thanks to the parallel editing sequence which shows Zed at work as Éric shoots up [54:10], followed by the joke scene [56:00]. When Zed finds Éric and Oliver playing dead, he says: "Very funny, man. You guys are a bunch of hysterical fuckin' pricks. [...] Real mature." [69:45] It seems to me that, like Butch in *Pulp Fiction*, Zed is meant to represent the father in relation to the childish Europeans; the link with *Pulp Fiction* can be further established because "The Gold Watch" was allegedly[35] co-written by Avary and has a character named Zed who is a perverted police officer. To a lesser degree, Zed is also a highly ambivalent father figure who asks Zoe to call him "Captain America," calls her "baby" [10:10], putting her in the position of the child, but lets her ride him and is saved by her in the end. Zed could represent, then, the failure of U.S. leadership, leaving it in the hands of the destructive French males and the heroic French female.

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31 *"Casse toi ! Rentre dans ta chambre !"*

32 In "Shooting Zoe," producer Samuel Hadida describes the film as a Nouvelle Vague version of a Jean-Pierre Melville film, that plays on the fantasy of being Alain Delon robbing a bank [2:40].

33 *"Voulez-vous du spectacle ? hein ? hein ?"*

34 *"Ils en ont rien à branler de nos otages !"*

35 Yannick Surcouf considers Avary's and Tarantino's participations in each other's films to be "limited" (Surcouf 1998, 70)

Zed's being helplessly carried along by events and his inability to take part in the fun only partially reflects the position of some spectators' exclusion from the playful use of French. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the film's ideal spectator is none other than the author of the translations who masters both languages: Yrava Regor [94:55] . . . Roger Avary backwards. This could mean that the ideal spectator is none other than the director, but that would be not taking into account the fact that Jean-Hugues Anglade rewrote most of the French dialogues[36]. The ideal spectator would be, rather, someone familiar with American and French culture, in other words, Éric, the film's villain. This process of excluding the American character along with the spectator unfamiliar with French and French culture certainly makes *Killing Zoe* a more elitist film than *Pulp Fiction*, which allows for multiple readings that do participate in the film's structure but are by no means indispensable to the understanding of the narrative or most of the humor. However, just as the death of the American tourist can be seen as a cathartic vent for French exceptionalism, Éric's ritualized death at the end of *Killing Zoe* [89:30] may be cathartic for the spectator who feels excluded because he does not fit the film's ideal spectator. Of course, it is also the death of a Hollywood stereotype brought about in an excessive[37] parody of Hollywood representations of violence. In the end, the narrative of this *American* film enables *France* to come out stronger, with a loose French woman saving a rather passive American man from a tyrannical French monster, hence reversing the Hollywood stereotype of French weakness vs. American strength while upholding others, in an attempt to conciliate them. It is no wonder, then, that the film's dominant colors are so obviously blue, white and red, the colors of both nations.

36 See the interview with Jean-Hugues Anglade in the DVD extras [4:35]

37 Samuel Hadida says Avary wanted to beat Sam Peckinpah's record of a character getting shot 45 times [52:25].

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